Italy in 1955 was a very poor country. During World War Two, Italy - ruled by the Fascist Mussolini - had initially fought alongside Nazi Germany. Yet the Italians became increasingly anxious about their role in the war and about Fascism, and in 1943, Mussolini was deposed by Victor Emmanuel III, the king of Italy. Italy then switched sides in the war and supported the British allies, but suffered huge loses in northern towns and villages as the Nazis tried to take revenge. After the war, following a referendum, the monarchy was abolished and a republic was established.



The Brooklyn Bridge over the East River between Manhattan and Brooklyn

However, the economy was slow to grow, especially in the south, which was less industrialized. With no jobs and no prospects, it was not surprising that many people decided to try their luck in 'rich' America. There was a thriving trade in illegal immigration, encouraged by the dockyard owners, who knew that they could get cheap labour from immigrants until they had paid for their passage over. Once they had paid their fare, the immigrants were left to make their own way.

When Italy joined the new European Economic Community in 1957, much money was pumped into Italy to reduce unemployment. One key part of this process was the establishment of the Fiat factory in Turin: thousands of peasants from the south moved north to make cars. Sadly, this was just too late for Marco and Rodolpho.

The play is set in Red Hook, Brooklyn, a very poor area, described by Alfieri as the slum that faces the bay on the seaward side of Brooklyn Bridge.